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ABSTRACT

Principals of elementary and secondary schools in Idaho (N=246) responded to a questionnaire that asked them to identify some causes of teacher failure. The major problems leading to teachers being placed on probation or not having contracts renewed appeared to be in the areas of: (1) behavior management and student motivation; (2) personality and attitude; and (3) planning and communication. Prevalant among the principals' comments were observations on how the teacher worked with students, parents, and the school administration. In a discussion of the results, it is suggested that in teacher training there should be greater emphasis on interpersonal communication, planning, and classroom management skills. (JD)

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# TEACHER FAILURE

## SOME POTENTIAL CAUSES

Robert D. Lerch

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It is not uncommon, no matter what endeavor one is involved in, to want to receive some sort of information on one's success. In the area of education these results can be obtained in various ways. Quite often simple paper and pencil tests are used. As often as not the most important results do not exhibit themselves immediately. The same can be said for teacher education. We have test results which tell us "what a person knows about a subject." We also have information on how teacher-education students responded to a checklist of attitudes. We, the teacher educators, conduct follow-up studies in which we ask our graduates' immediate superiors to provide us with an opinion as to how well they performed certain duties or to what extent they exhibited certain competencies. We have been pleased with the comments provided to us by our graduates' supervisors and we feel good about our programs. However, there of course have been numerous suggestions recently, both internal and external, that teacher-education needs to make considerable change in its programs in order to prepare better teachers. (Carnegie

SP027 895

Commission Report, Holmes Group, Legislative actions in various states, Christian Science Monitor, August 5, 1986 Section B)

These suggestions are undoubtedly considered opinions and no doubt based on research results. However, I personally have wondered if some clues on ways to improve teacher-training programs might be found by identifying causes of teacher failure.

An attempt to identify some of these causes of teacher failure was made in the winter/spring of 1986 by requesting information of the principals of the schools in Idaho. All principals were sent a letter questionnaire in which failure as a teacher was defined as "those placed on probation or who would not have their contract renewed." (Appendix A)

The principals were asked to identify the number of teachers who could be thus classified as "failures," whether they were Elementary, Junior High, Senior High and some possible reasons. The principals were also encouraged to comment as much as they wished.

The number of responses was very high and much appreciated. A total of 363 letter questionnaires were mailed and 246 were returned (68%). Many of the responses included multiple comments.

Following is a tabulation of the responses and a condensation of the comments which were provided:

| | Elementary | Junior High | Senior High |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of teachers placed on probation or not renewed | 51 | 38 | 71 |
| Did not know the subject matter. | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| The position was eliminated. | 5 | 3 | 11 |
| Did not work well with students | 19 | 15 | 26 |
| Did not work well with parents. | 16 | 10 | 19 |
| Did not work well with the Administration. | 12 | 9 | 9 |
| Did not work well with the Community. | 0 | 4 | 10 |
| Was misassigned and correctly certified person found. | 0 | 3 | 1 |

Comments seemed similar enough across the different groups (Elementary, Junior High, Senior High) that the groups were combined. Also, the comments although added to different questions of the questionnaire seemed to fit into the following generalized categories: (number of responses in parentheses)

Poor preparation - (5)

Behavior, management and motivation problems - (60)

Personality and attitude - (29)

Lack of teaching skills - (17)

Poor communication - (21)

Planning problems - (21)

Little cooperation - (7)

Will place individual on improvement plan - (6)

Turn average teacher into superior teacher - (3)

Health - (8)

Funding problems - (12)

Relations with parents and/or students - (16)

Knowledge of subject - (5)

Declining enrollment - (3)

Unprofessional - (3)

Poor judgement - (5)

Due to the design of the questionnaire the responding principals were free to check as many categories as they wished and provide as many comments as they desired. As a result of the unstructured nature of the questions, it is difficult to draw too many conclusions, however, it does seem some are warranted.

Although critics identify lack of knowledge of subject matter as a problem, at least from the data, it is not as major a problem as some other items. Since the Idaho Certification standards (secondary) requires a 30-credit major and 20-credit minor or single field of 45-credits, it is possible that content requirements are currently high enough that Liberal Arts majors in a subject field may not be needed. In a very cursory review of one institution of higher education, it was found that the requirements for a Liberal Arts major appear to vary from 35-45 credits. This seems to be little different from the 30-credit minimum required currently for certification by all secondary certifiers whether holding degree in the content area or education. Elementary Education/Teacher Education requirements may be a different situation and should be explored.

A second conclusion would seem to be that empnasis on interpersonal communication, conferencing, and listening skills may need to be increased. Apparently most "failures" are due to

inability to "get along with others" whether they be students, parents, administration or the community.

Another area identified as a problem area is weakness in management. This area has long been identified as a problem area. Some people refer to it as discipline. Comments generally indicate that management skills and personality/attitude thrusts are more often lacking than teaching and planning skills. The way in which the words discipline and management were used raised suspicion that there were diverse ideas being expressed.

If this were the only information available to decision makers, particularly those developing teacher training programs it would seem appropriate to increase the concentration on "people" skills, while retaining the current, required content preparation. Also, future research in the area should include specific definitions of management description, etc., so that greater clarity of results could be obtained. Further, knowledge level information about "people skills" may not be sufficient but, implementation mastery may be necessary.

Some respondents identified attitude as a problem. The indication that "attitude" is an important ingredient in success or failure is not new. The way in which the word attitude was used raises the question of how an appropriate attitude might be fostered, as well as what is "an appropriate attitude."

The whole area of planning, teaching and communication skills has been identified as important for a teacher to possess or acquire. The difficulty with addressing these areas is that they are broad areas and were not well defined by the respondents. What constitutes good planning is often debated. Possibly the planning is not as important as the implementation of the planning. In the area of teaching skills, one might ask which skills are most important. The whole area of communication has been identified as a problem area, whether that communication is with students, parents, administration or community.

Probably the greatest value of the information collected with this questionnaire is to identify broad areas of concern which should be further investigated. This could lead to identification of action, both preservice and in-service, which should be taken to reduce the number of teacher failures.

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
Department of Education

March 1, 1986

Dear Principal:

For quite a few years I have been wondering if there is some commonality among teachers who "fail." I'm interested in your perceptions of causes of failure on the part of teachers and request that you respond to the following questions anonymously and return it to me in the enclosed postage paid envelope.

For the purposes of this document please consider teachers who are/were placed on probation or will not have their contract renewed as "failures." Please add comments after any questions you feel would help clarify the situation.

____ 1. Number of teachers who were either placed on probation or will not be renewed (1985-86).
Elementary ____, Jr. High _____, Sr. High _____. Comments: _____

_____

Possible reasons for non renewal or probation (please indicate the number who fit into each).

_____ 2. Did not know subject matter _____. Comments: _____

_____

_____ 3. Position eliminated, please explain. _____

_____

_____ 4. Did not work well with students ____, parents ____, administration ____, community ____. Comments: _____

_____

_____ 5. Was "misassigned" and correctly certificated person found ____. Comments:

_____

_____ 6. Was "misassigned" and _____

_____

_____ 7. Other: _____

Sincerely,

Robert D. Lerch, Ed.D.
Chairman



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